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ABSTRACT

Study of the development of libraries and librarianship may be done only historically, by analysis of the records of development. Such study necessarily is interpretive because historical study does not establish facts, but proceeds from them. In historical study an hypothesis may not be used as in scientific study, because the hypothesis is not testable. (Author)

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Interpretation in Historical Writing:
The Study of Development in
Librarianship

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Several years ago, at a meeting of the AALS Library History Interest Group (in Chicago in 1971, I think) there arose a discussion about the need for a hypothesis in historical research and writing. A better word, perhaps, would be that the discussion erupted, for it became somewhat vigorous, not to say intermittently ill-tempered (but never enough so to qualify for a Smithsonian investigation of 'short-lived phenomena'). As with many other spontaneous arguments this one subsided without attention to the underlying question: what do we mean by hypothesis? It is a question relevant to a discussion of 'interpretation' in historical writing.

In history, as I understand our use of the word, a hypothesis is a tentative explanation of the facts about a particular event, or other entity or phenomenon. That may be true, to the extent that all history is tentative, that is, subject to revision under the impact of new evidence or perspective. However, it appears that our use of the term hypothesis is derived from the usage of social scientists, who in turn derived their understanding from the practices of natural scientists. So, from this particular perspective, one hardly could disagree with the argument that a hypothesis is essential in history, because explanation of the facts simply is interpretation of them.

That idea appears to be based in misunderstanding of the

activities of natural scientists. To state the matter more nearly correctly, scientific explanation is the establishment of facts. That is, the facts are demonstrated by the explanation. For example, the famous equation $E = Mc^2$, is not a theory, but a statement of fact. (The equation itself is but a short-hand version of an elaborate statement, "In any hydrogen atom....") So it is with other explanations in science. In this situation, then, the hypothesis is but a tentative statement, one which the scientist believes will be borne out by experiment -- that is, a test of the hypothesis. Research, in science, is only one part of a process in which facts are established. Explanation is the statement of facts.

In historical study the problem of explanation is of a different order. The facts about a problem -- the basic ones, at least -- are established before research even can begin. The subject (activity, event, person, or other entity) is known to be, or to have been. (For a contrary example in science, the 'theory of atoms' was known for hundreds of years before the fact of atoms was demonstrated.) If the fact is not known there is nothing to investigate. To use an example from librarianship, the Boston Public Library was known before there was any historical concern with it. Indeed, before any historian began to concern himself with the Boston Public Library there was an extensive array of

facts about it:

1. The 1848 Act of the Massachusetts General Court, which authorized the establishment of the Library.
2. The 1850 Ordinance of the Boston Common Council, by which the Library was created.
3. The 1852 Report of the Trustees of the Library.
4. The 1854 opening of the Boston Public Library.

And more, for associated with this set of facts was a number of others: the 1854 catalog of the Library; the names of the Trustees; the name of the Librarian; the number of books in the collection; and so on.

By themselves, or in an aggregate, the facts of the Boston Public Library do not constitute history; they are not the history of the Library even if they are presented in a particular order, such as the chronological. They remain simply a set of facts, or statements of fact. Something else must be done with them before a history of the Boston Public Library may be said to exist: the facts must be organized into a coherent whole, and a course of development must be shown. The history is the narrative which results from the organization of facts and demonstration of development.

This line of argument, of course, changes the idea of hypothe-

sis in historical study. In science the hypothesis is a marshalling of ideas toward the establishment of fact; in history, conversely, the marshalling of facts does not necessarily lead to hypothesis. It is possible to take an array of facts and arrange them in some order without the elaboration of what has been called a hypothesis. In science the hypothesis must be testable, without regard to time or place; it must be precisely repeatable, and each repetition must yield identical results. Facts are established by test, e.g.: at sea level water freezes when it reaches a temperature of 0 degrees Celsius. In history the known facts are presented in some orderly manner which may lead the historian to a conclusion, that is, a statement of opinion based in analysis of the facts, but the conclusion is not necessarily a hypothesis. Indeed, usually it is not, because the conclusion is not testable.

The idea may be illustrated by example. George Bobinski's Carnegie libraries: their history and impact on American public library development (Chicago: A.L.A., 1969) is an excellent study based on close investigation of the record of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropy. Bobinski's conclusions are presented in the final chapter, "Impact of Carnegie philanthropy..." a discussion of long term effect to the major conclusion: "Carnegie's benefactions have, in truth, played a major role in American public library development." (p. 201) The conclusion is historical, supported by

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analysis of the record; thus it is interpretive. However, it is not a hypothesis. It may not be tested, because 'impact,' in this context, cannot be measured.

History is a many-splendored discipline, but it may be simplified by a statement of definition: it is a report based on the study of a record, or set of records. It is a written analysis of the record of actions, ideas, and statements. As such, history is always incomplete, because the record always is incomplete. The full story about an idea, event or person never can be told. In addition to the condition of incompleteness in the record the historian is compelled to tell an incomplete story because of the necessity to impose intellectual order on the record, which sometimes is quite disordered. Thus the historian interprets the record, and his story necessarily is interpretive.

The idea of interpretation in the history of libraries and librarianship appears to be in some disrepute, if the "Notes" section of the last issue of the Journal of Library History may be accepted as indicating prevailing opinion among library historians. Haynes McMullen, in the paper presented to this group last year, was openly skeptical of interpretation, and the commentaries on his paper fairly may be described as not in disagreement. [Journal of Library History, 13: 432-50 (Fall 1978).] Here there is no

quarrel with the positions taken by Professor McMullen and his commentators; rather, there is a concern to contribute to the expansion of our understanding of history, and thus to expansion of our understanding of librarianship.

First, the historian interprets because, as has been said, he writes an incomplete story, even if he tells you otherwise. The decision about what to include is an act of interpretation. It may have one or many sources; ultimately, it comes down to the historian's appreciation of what is included: its importance, its relevance to the argument advanced, even sometimes, its dramatic quality. Inclusion, and its opposite, exclusion, are the result of interpretive decisions.

The ordering of the story also is a matter of interpretation. The events or other topics with which the historian deals may have occurred in a sequence, but the fact of sequence does not always reveal the significance of events nor their relationships, so the historian may be compelled to impose another order on his materials. As with the problems of inclusion, decisions about order may have several sources, but they revolve around the basic consideration that reporting events in the sequence in which they occurred may not be adequate to explanation of them.

Inclusion and arrangement are the basic intellectual components of interpretation; thus, they are the warp and weft of history. Other elements may be added to the weave, as the historian's purposes may require: to lend 'color,' or dramatic quality, to propagandize, to criticize, or to acclaim. The historian, after all, usually writes for effect on the reader, and the use of literary devices or strategems is an ancient practice by historians. Indeed, probably none of us is free of the conceit inherent in the practice. Nevertheless, none of us can avoid a measure of interpretation. It is part and parcel of our work as historians. The very act of writing history is interpretation of the record.

Beyond this is another aspect to interpretation in history. It relates to our purposes: we seek to explain what is, by examination of how it came to be. To this examination the question of motive is irrelevant, except as we may be concerned with our own motives. (Parenthetically, we cannot be concerned effectively with the motives of those who preceded us, because the record does not adequately disclose their motives.) Fundamentally, our motives are to explain. Here, however, is another case of historian's variance from scientists. The scientists' explanations establish facts; historians, in their explanations, attempt to determine meaning. That is, we attempt understanding of the present in the light of the record of how we got here.

A number of distinguished historians have attempted to deal with the metaphor of explanation. Two have made attempts especially attractive to me: Herbert J. Muller's concept of history as the effort to create a "useable past," and William A. Williams' idea about "history as a way of learning," so that we may be free of the past. [Herbert J. Muller, *Uses of the past*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952); William A. Williams, *Contours of American history*. (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, c1964).] Both are prejudiced interpreters of the record. That is, the writing of each has been done in the light of a favorable judgement about democratic ideals. In their prejudices, each has sought the meaning of the facts from the past, each has tried to make clear the relevance of the past to our present condition. That is what interpretation is all about: the search for the meaning of the record. The record may not be left to speak for itself. Indeed, it cannot; it becomes clear only as it is analyzed and interpreted by historians.

The meaning of the record also is the basic question which concerns library historians. The record of library development is too complex and voluminous for any one librarian to consult, and it gets more so every year (despite librarians' notorious inattention to the preservation of their professions' records). Its meaning therefore must be sought by librarians who are historians also.

The word development has been introduced here, advisedly: libraries and librarianship are results of development -- conscious and purposeful actions to desired ends. They neither evolved nor grew, but have been developed to meet the needs of their developers. Libraries and librarianship may be observed, and, to some extent, measured, at a given moment; but their development may be studied only in the historical mode, by analysis of the record, made in accord with historians' understandings of present needs and purposes.